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Building a national identity in a land of many contrasts

22 May 2008

Language and National Identity in Africa. Editor Andrew Simpson. Edition First. Publisher Oxford University Press. Pages 384. Price £75.00/£25.00. ISBN 9780199286744/6751.

Language and National Identity in Africa is, in my view, a most comprehensive account of language policy in postcolonial Africa. Editor Andrew Simpson has put together an impressive collection of experiences, with a wide geographical coverage of the continent, diverse colonial and postcolonial experiences and varying degrees of linguistic diversity.

A subtitle for the collection could have been, in Sue Wright's (Community and Communication: The Role of Language in Nation State Building and European Integration, 2000) words, "the role of language in nation building". The uniqueness of each case notwithstanding, it appears that the language question has been central in every effort at nation-building in Africa. It also appears that, contrary to what the title of the collection suggests (monolingualism), in Africa the relationship between language and national identity is most effectively captured by the extended Zambian motto as proposed by Lutz Marten and Nancy C. Kulu in this volume: "One Zambia, One Nation, Many Languages". This appears to be the only policy formulation, in its various local versions, that the peoples of Africa are prepared to accept.

The choice of case studies portrays Africa, sub-Saharan Africa in particular, in a way that is not necessarily correct. Not each and every sub-Saharan African country is multilingual in the sense of having many indigenous languages and not every country came into being as a result of decisions made by colonialists.

For example, two small countries, Rwanda and Burundi, are basically monolingual in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi respectively. Also, these countries, even though they were colonised, do not seem to have been faced with the problem of building a national identity, as they existed as nations even before colonisation. Yet after colonisation, language policy decisions have had to be made. More specifically, these countries have not just reverted back to pre-colonial language situations. In other words, language policy decisions in Africa might not be accountable solely in terms of nation-building. Inclusion of a case study on the sociolinguistic situation of these or similar countries would be an important addition to the picture.

Beyond the specific African context, this book is remarkable for the range of themes, each of which is interesting in its own right, that emerge from the case studies. For lack of space, I can highlight only a few. A recurrent theme is that of national identity as inward-looking and as outward-looking and whether this can easily be made to correlate with linguistic distinctions such as communalist versus ecumenical language (Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui, The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience, 1998). An interesting issue that emerges from a number of cases is that of language appropriation, whether, almost 50 years after colonisation, former colonial languages such as English and French should continue to be seen as "foreign" languages or whether, like Arabic, they should be viewed as "local", even though non-indigenous, languages. Obviously, this has implications, among other things, as to what counts as the standard.

Finally, various case studies touch on the issue of language policies vis-a-vis language diffusion, pointing to the possibility that, in some cases, doing nothing (laissez-faire policy) facilitates language diffusion more effectively than explicit and interventionist policies.

Who is it for? Policymakers, sociolinguists, historians, sociologists and so on.

Presentation - Clear use of language, recurrent sections and subsections and use of maps make the text readily accessible to most readers.

Would you recommend it? Highly.

Reviewer:

Joseph Gafaranga is senior lecturer in linguistics and English language, School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, University of Edinburgh.